DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 406 855 FL 801 140

AUTHOR Van Duzer, Carol
TITLE Improving ESL Learners' Listening Skills: At the Workplace and Beyond. ERIC PAIE Q & A.
INSTITUTION National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC.; Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, D.C.; Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education, Washington, DC.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.; Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, New York, N.Y.
PUB DATE Feb 97
NOTE 6p.; A product of the Project in Adult Immigrant Education (PAIE).
CONTRACT RR93002010
AVAILABLE FROM NCLE, 1118 22nd Street N.W., Washington, DC 20037.
PUB TYPE ERIC Publications (071)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Adult Education; Adult Learning; Class Activities; Cognitive Processes; *English (Second Language); *Language Processing; *Listening Comprehension; *Listening Skills; Second Language Instruction; Skill Development; *Vocational English (Second Language); *Work Environment

ABSTRACT

Listening is a critical element in the competent language performance of adult second language learners. Listening is a demanding process, because of both the process itself and factors that characterize the listener, speaker, message content, and any accompanying visual support. The speaker's use of colloquial language and reduced forms, familiarity of content, and ability to interpret visual supports also affect comprehension. Although once labeled a passive skill, listening is an active process of selecting and interpreting information, with several basic processes at work, each influencing teaching techniques and activities. Two cognitive processes, bottom-up and top-down, are also occurring. Research suggests a silent or pre-speaking period is beneficial for beginning language learners, allowing storage of information. Knowledge about the listening process and factors that affect it can guide listening skill development in English-as-a-Second-Language classes. Listening lessons should guide the learner through three stages: pre-listening; listening task; and post-listening activity. Numerous activities can develop listening skills: doing (physical); choosing; transferring; answering; condensing; extending; duplicating; modeling; and conversing. Teachers can incorporate activities in a way that reflects real-world integration of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Contains 16 references. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ERIC PAIE Q & A

Improving ESL Learners' Listening Skills: At the Workplace and Beyond

by Carol Van Duzer

ED 406 855

FL 801 140

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Miriam Burt

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ERIC PAIE Q & A

February 1997

Project in Adult Immigrant Education PAIE
National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Improving ESL Learners' Listening Skills: At the Workplace and Beyond

by Carol Van Duzer
Center for Applied Linguistics

Listening is a critical element in the competent language performance of adult second language learners, whether they are communicating at school, at work, or in the community. Through the normal course of a day, listening is used nearly twice as much as speaking and four to five times as much as reading and writing (Rivers, 1981). In a recent study of Fortune 500 Corporations, Wolvin and Coakley (1991) found that listening was perceived to be crucial for communication at work with regards to entry-level employment, job success, general career competence, managerial competency, and effectiveness of relationships between supervisors and subordinates. Yet listening remains one of the least understood processes in language learning despite the recognition of the critical role it plays both in communication and in language acquisition (Morley, 1991). As language teaching has moved toward comprehension-based approaches, listening to learn has become an important element in the adult English as a second language (ESL) classroom (Lund, 1990).

This Q&A summarizes what is known about the listening process as it relates to adult second language learners; it discusses the factors affecting listening; it describes the listening process; it suggests guidelines to consider in teaching listening; and it gives examples of activities for practicing and developing listening skills in adults learning English as a second language. Although most of the activities described have a workplace program context, the same types of activities could be used in any adult ESL class to improve learners' listening in all facets of life: at school, at work, or in the community.

What are some factors that affect the listening process?

Listening is a demanding process, not only because of the complexity of the process itself, but also due to factors that characterize the listener, the speaker, the content of the message, and any visual support that accompanies the message (Brown & Yule, 1983).

The Listener

Interest in a topic increases the listener's comprehension; the listener may tune out topics that are not of interest. A listener who is an active participant in a conversation generally has more background knowledge to facilitate understanding of the topic than a listener who is, in effect, eavesdropping on a conversation between two people whose communication has been recorded on an audiotape. Further, the ability to use negotiation skills, such as asking for clarification, repetition, or definition of points not understood, enable a listener to make sense of the incoming information.

The Speaker

Colloquial language and reduced forms make comprehension more difficult. The extent to which the speaker uses these language forms impacts comprehension. The more exposure the listener has to them, the greater the ability to comprehend. A speaker's rate of delivery may be too fast, too slow, or have too many hesitations for a listener to follow. Awareness of a speaker's corrections and use of rephrasing ("er. . . I mean . . .That is . . .") can assist the listener. Learners need practice in recognizing these speech habits as clues to deciphering meaning.

Content

Content that is familiar is easier to comprehend than content with unfamiliar vocabulary or for which the listener has insufficient background knowledge.

Visual Support

Visual support, such as video, pictures, diagrams, gestures, facial expressions, and body language, can increase comprehension if the learner is able to correctly interpret it.

What happens when we listen?

Although once labeled a passive skill, listening is very much an active process of selecting and interpreting information from auditory and visual clues (Richards, 1983; Rubin, 1995). Most of what is known about the listening process stems from research on native language development; however, as the importance of teaching listening comprehension has increased, so has the inquiry into second language listening comprehension. (See Rubin, 1994, for a comprehensive review of recent studies.)

There are several basic processes at work in listening. These do not necessarily occur sequentially; they may occur simultaneously, in rapid succession, or backward and forward as needed. The listener is not usually conscious of performing these steps, nor of switching back and forth between them. The listener:

1) determines a reason for listening;
2) takes the raw speech and deposits an image of it in short-term memory;
3) attempts to organize the information by identifying the type of speech event (conversation, lecture, radio ad) and the function of the message (persuade, inform, request);
4) predicts information expected to be included in the message;
5) recalls background information (schemata) to help interpret the message;
6) assigns a meaning to the message;
7) checks that the message has been understood;
8) determines the information to be held in long-term memory;
9) deletes the original form of the message that had been received into short-term memory (Brown 1994; Dunkel, 1986).

CAL Center for Applied Linguistics • 1118 22nd Street, NW • Washington, DC 20037 • (202)429-9292

Each of these steps influences the techniques and activities a teacher might choose to incorporate into instruction in order to assist learners in learning to listen as well as listening to learn.

What other processes are at work?

At the same time, two types of cognitive processing are also occurring: bottom-up and top-down processing.

Top-down processing

Top-down processing refers to utilizing schemata (background knowledge and global understanding) to derive meaning from and interpret the message. For example, in preparing for training on the operation of a new floor polisher, top-down processing is activated as the learner engages in an activity that reviews what the learner already knows about using the old floor polisher. This might entail discussing the steps in the polishing process; reviewing vocabulary such as switch, on, off, etc.; or generating a list of questions that the learner would like answered in the training.

Bottom-up processing

Bottom-up processing refers to deriving the meaning of the message based on the incoming language data, from sounds, to words, to grammatical relationships, to meaning. Stress, rhythm, and intonation also play a role in bottom-up processing. Bottom-up processing would be activated as the learner is signaled to verify comprehension by the trainer/teacher asking a question using the declarative form with rising intonation ("You see that switch there?"). Practice in recognizing statements and questions that differ only in intonation help the learner develop bottom-up processing skills.

Learners need to be aware that both of these processes affect their listening comprehension, and they need to be given opportunities to practice employing each of them.

How can listening help the adult learner acquire English?

Current research and theory point to the benefit of providing a silent or pre-speaking period for the beginning-level learner (Dunkel, 1991). Delaying production gives learners the opportunity to store information in their memories. It also spares them the trauma of task overload and speaking before they are ready. The silent period may be long or short. It could comprise several class periods of listening activities that foster vocabulary and build comprehension such as in the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach. In this approach, the teacher gives a series of commands while demonstrating each one. Learners then show their comprehension by acting out the commands as repeated by the teacher. Learners themselves begin to give the commands as they feel comfortable speaking. Or, the silent period may consist of learners listening to a tape-recorded conversation two or three times before answering questions about the content. A listening period consistent with the demands of the following productive task works to enhance rather than inhibit language acquisition and helps the more advanced-level learner as well as the beginner.

What should be considered when selecting listening techniques and activities?

What is known about the listening process and the factors that affect listening can be a guide when incorporating listening skill development into adult ESL classes. The following guidelines have been adapted from a variety of sources including Brod (1996), Brown (1994), Dunkel (1991), Mendelsohn (1994), Morley (1991), Peterson (1991), Richards (1983), and Rost (1991).

Listening should be relevant.

Because learners listen with a purpose and listen to things that interest them, accounting for the goals and experiences of the learners will keep motivation and attention high. For example, if learners at a worksite need to be able to understand new policies and procedures introduced at staff meetings, in class they should be helped to develop the abilities to identify main ideas and supporting details, to identify cause and effect, to indicate comprehension or lack of comprehension, and to ask for clarification.

Material should be authentic.

Authenticity should be evident both in language and in task. The language should reflect real discourse, including hesitations, rephrasing, and a variety of accents. Although the language needs to be comprehensible, it does not need to be constantly modified or simplified to make it easier for the level of the listener. Level of difficulty can be controlled by the selection of the task. For example, in a unit on following instructions, at the beginning level, the learner might hear a command ("May I borrow your hammer?") and respond by choosing the correct item. At an intermediate level, the learner might hear a series of instructions ("Go to the broom closet, get the floor polisher, take it to the hall in front of the cafeteria, polish the floor there, then go to the . . .") and respond appropriately by tracing the route on a floor plan of the worksite. An advanced-level learner might listen to an audio tape of an actual work meeting and write a summary of the instructions the supervisor gave the team. Use of authentic material, such as workplace training videos, audio tapes of actual workplace exchanges, and TV and radio broadcasts, increases transferability to listening outside of the ESL classroom context—to work and to community.

Opportunities to develop both top-down and bottom-up processing skills should be offered.

As mentioned above, top-down oriented activities encourage the learners to discuss what they already know about a topic, and bottom-up practice activities give confidence in accurate hearing and comprehension of the components of the language (sounds, words, intonation, grammatical structures).

The development of listening strategies should be encouraged.

Predicting, asking for clarification, and using non-verbal cues are examples of strategies that increase chances for successful listening. For example, using video can help learners develop cognitive strategies. As they view a segment with the sound off, learners can be asked to make predictions about what is happening by answering questions about setting, action, and interaction; viewing the segment again with the sound on allows them to confirm or modify their hypothesis (Rubin, 1995).

Activities should teach, not test.

Teachers should avoid using activities that tend to focus on memory rather than on the process of listening or that simply give practice rather than help learners develop listening ability. For example, simply having the learners listen to a passage followed by true/false questions might indicate how much the learners remembered rather than helping them to develop the skill of determining main idea and details. Pre- and post-listening task activities would help the learners to focus attention on what to listen for, to assess how accurately they succeeded, and to transfer the listening skill to the world beyond the classroom.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

What are the steps in a listening lesson?

The teacher can facilitate the development of listening ability by creating listening lessons that guide the learner through three stages: pre-listening, the listening task, and post-listening.

Engage the learners in a pre-listening activity.

This activity should establish the purpose of the listening activity and activate the schemata by encouraging the learners to think about and discuss what they already know about the content of the listening text. This activity can also provide the background needed for them to understand the text, and it can focus attention on what to listen for.

Do the listening task itself.

The task should involve the listener in getting information and in *immediately* doing something with it.

Engage in a post-listening activity.

This activity should help the listener to evaluate success in carrying out the task and to integrate listening with the other language skills. The teacher should encourage practice outside of the classroom whenever possible.

For example, at a worksite where schedule changes are announced at weekly team meetings, learners may need practice recognizing details such as their names, times, and dates within a longer stream of speech. A tape of such announcements may be used along with any pertinent forms or a weekly calendar. The lesson stages might proceed as follows:

Listening Lesson Example

Do a pre-listening activity:

Ask the learners questions about what happens at the weekly meetings. Ask specifically about schedule changes. Show any form or the weekly calendar. Discuss its use and demonstrate how to fill it out if necessary.

Describe the task:

Tell the learners they will be listening to a tape of a meeting. On the form/calendar they are to write down the schedule they hear. Demonstrate.

Have the learners do the task:

Play the tape while they fill out the form.

Do a post-listening activity:

Ask the learners how they thought they did. Was it easy or difficult? Why? They may listen again if they want to. Have them compare their forms with a partner or check the information by filling a form out as a whole class.

Then have the learner be the boss and write a script with schedule changes. Have them practice in pairs or small groups giving and recording schedule changes.

What kinds of listening tasks are appropriate?

There are numerous activities to choose from for developing listening skills. Lund (1990) has categorized them according to nine responses that can be observed as comprehension checks:

1) *Doing*: the listener responds physically such as in Total Physical Response (TPR);
2) *Choosing*: the listener selects from alternatives such as pictures, objects, texts, or actions;
3) *Transferring*: the listener transforms the message such as drawing a route on map, or filling in a chart;
4) *Answering*: the listener answers questions about the text;
5) *Condensing*: the listener takes notes or makes an outline;
6) *Extending*: the listener goes beyond the text by continuing the story or solving a problem;
7) *Duplicating*: the listener simply repeats or translates the message;
8) *Modeling*: the listener performs a similar task, e.g. gives instructions to a coworker after listening to a model or;
9) *Conversing*: the listener is an active participant in a face-to-face conversation.

A listening component can be built into an adult ESL lesson based on these activity response types in concert with the guidelines mentioned above. For example, *choosing* as a response may by used to develop bottom-up skills as learners listen to series of sentence patterns with rising and falling intonation and check column 1 (rising) or column 2 (falling) according to the pattern heard; or, the top-down skill of getting the gist of the message may be developed as learners hear sentences describing a work task and select the appropriate picture (Peterson, 1991). An activity involving *conversing* might be to set up projects which call for learners to conduct interviews with native speakers outside of class on a theme related to a particular unit of study. For example, in a unit on Problem Solving on the Job, learners might ask questions about where and to whom coworkers go for help when they have a problem with a piece of equipment or with another worker or with understanding internal memos. (See Nunan and Miller (1995) and Rost (1991) for descriptions of listening tasks.)

Conclusion

Assisting learners in the development of listening comprehension is a challenge. It is a challenge that demands both the teacher's and the learner's attention because of the critical role that listening plays, not only in communication, but also in the acquisition of language. Knowledge of the listening process and factors that affect listening enable teachers to select or create listening texts and activities that meet the needs of the their adult ESL learners. Teachers, then, must weave these listening activities into the curriculum to create a balance that mirrors the real-world integration of listening with speaking, reading, and writing.

References

Brod, S. (1996). *Teaching listening in the workplace English language training program at the Spring Institute*. Unpublished manuscript.

Brown, G., & Yule, G. (1983). *Teaching the spoken language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Brown, H.D. (1994). *Teaching by principles: An interactive approach to language pedagogy*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents.

Dunkel, P. (1986). Developing listening fluency in L2: Theoretical principles and pedagogical considerations. *The Modern Language Journal, 70*(2), 99-106.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Dunkel, P. (1991). Listening in the native and second/foreign language: Toward an integration of research and practice. *TESOL Quarterly, 25*(3), 431- 457.

Lund, R.J. (1990). A taxonomy for teaching second language listening. *Foreign Language Annals, 23*, 105-115.

Mendelsohn, D.J. (1994). *Learning to listen: A strategy-based approach for the second-language learner*. San Diego: Dominie Press.

Morley, J. (1991). Listening comprehension in second/foreign language instruction. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.), *Teaching english as a second or foreign language* (2nd ed.) (pp. 81-106). Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Nunan, D., & Miller, L. (Eds.). (1995). *New Ways in Teaching Listening*. Alexandria, VA: Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 388 054)

Peterson, P.W. (1991). A synthesis of methods for interactive listening. In M. Celce-Murcia (Ed.),*Teaching English as a second/foreign language* (2nd ed.) (pp.106-122). Boston: Heinle and Heinle.

Richards, J. (1983). Listening comprehension: Approach, design, procedure. *TESOL Quarterly, 17*(2), 219-240.

Rivers, W.M. (1981). *Teaching foreign language skills* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Rost, M. (1991). *Listening in action: Activities for developing listening in language teaching*. New York: Prentice Hall.

Rubin, J. (1994). A review of second language listening comprehension research. *The Modern Language Journal. 78*(2),199-221.

Rubin, J. (1995). The contribution of video to the development of competence in listening. In D. Mendelsohn & J. Rubin (Eds.), *A guide for the teaching of second language listening* (pp. 151-165). San Diego: Dominie Press.

Wolvin, A., & Coakley, C. (1991). A survey of the status of listening training in some Fortune 500 Corporations. *Communication Education, 40*, 152-164.

ERIC/NCLE and PAIE Digests are available free of charge from the National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE), 1118 22nd Street NW, Washington, DC 20037; (202) 429-9292, ext. 200; e-mail: ncle@cal.org. World Wide Web: www.cal.org/ncle.

Citations with an ED number may be purchased from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) at 1-800-443-3742. (E-mail: service@edrs.com)

This article is produced by the Project in Adult Immigrant Education, funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation through a grant to the Center for Applied Linguistics.

The National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education (NCLE) is operated by the Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) with funding from the U.S. Department of Education (ED), Office of Educational Research and Improvement, under contract no. RR 93002010. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of ED or the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Visit NCLE on the World Wide Web at www.cal.org/ncle.